



An Anchor in Hard Times

Pets soothe stressed companions suffering from financial difficulties

by ARNA COHEN

John Henion has spent little time feeling sorry for himself after losing his job as a television producer and editor. His mastiff mix Nando won't let him. "Instead of being alone and reclusive all day, I have him as my companion," says the 32-year-old Oakland, Calif., resident. "And even when I don't feel like getting out, I have to because of my responsibility to him, which is good for me in the long run. It's my only exercise. Plus, he's just hilarious."

On one of their walks, Henion and Nando met a couple who had to give up their dog because they'd lost their house.

"I felt so bad for them. I never considered losing Nando. He's half the reason I've been able to keep my sense of humor," says Henion, who with a similarly jobless friend writes an "Unemploymentality" blog offering tongue-in-cheek musings on their status.

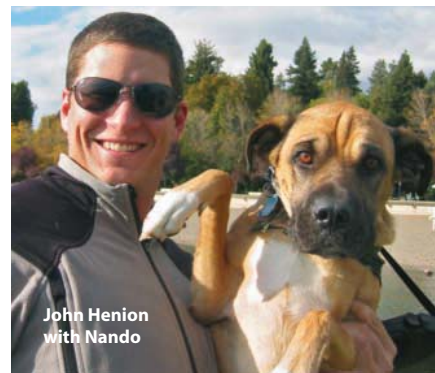
Fortunately, Henion's girlfriend is still gainfully employed, and by making changes to their lifestyle, the couple is able to maintain Nando's level of care. "My quality of life has gone down, but his has gone way up," Henion says, laughing. "He gets a lot more of my time and attention."

When facing financial setbacks, many pet owners realize they can sacrifice plenty if it means keeping their pets. They might clip coupons, do without new clothes, and forgo restaurant meals, travel, and cable TV. "It's funny what you don't miss when you don't have it," says Henion.

The devotion is understandable, given the tremendous physical and psychological benefits of animal companionship. Many studies show that simply stroking a pet lowers blood pressure, eases depression, and speeds healing.

Pets also boost our self-esteem, says Sue-Ellen Brown, a clinical psychologist at the Tuskegee University Center for the Study of Human-Animal Interdependent Relationships. Their sudden absence can be devastating, as stressful as losing a spouse or family member. "For people who have lost their jobs and then have to face losing their animals because of the inability to care for them financially, [that is] a double-whammy," says Brown. "Their stress levels will be much more likely to predispose them to a physical illness as well as [to] mental health issues such as depression or anxiety."

Even still-employed people who've experienced the strain of the economic crisis find life a little less taxing with a cat or dog to come home to. Working on Wall Street is no day at the beach even in good times, but Tracy Gordon's job there is more bearable because of her three "stress buster" cats. "When they sit in my lap and purr, I focus on them and forget the day. They give me such joy," she says. "I just can't imagine being without them."



John Henion
with Nando



Cut Costs, Not Quality

You're committed to sticking by your pet through thick and thin, job or no job. But even bills for the basics—food, checkups, vaccinations, and preventive medicines—can mount rapidly. Here are some tips for easing the drain on your wallet without compromising care.

- ▶ Check online for deals on food and medicine. Roberta Gorman of New York City, who lost her job last fall, orders special food for her cats from a website that offers lower prices and coupons. To treat one cat's renal failure, she also buys fluids online at a fraction of what they would cost at the animal hospital. Verify a site's reputation before making a purchase, and if you have any doubts, get the product from your veterinarian. Also ask if it's possible to prescribe a medication used for humans; a generic version at the pharmacy could be cheaper.
- ▶ If your pet has ongoing medical needs, find out whether you can provide some treatments at home. Gorman's vet has trained her to administer subcutaneous fluids, resulting in substantial savings.
- ▶ Find out about special offers for multiple-pet households, senior citizens, or older pets. Many veterinary schools and animal organizations offer low-cost spay/neuter surgeries, vaccinations, and treatment. Some clinics help only pets of low-income owners while others accept all pets. Call your veterinarian or local animal shelter for information.
- ▶ Consider investing in pet insurance, particularly if your pets are young and have no preexisting conditions. Gorman's insurance has paid a significant portion of her cats' vet bills. Pet insurance company Petplan offers a 5-percent discount to HSUS members and allows policyholders to create plans most appropriate to their needs and budgets. To research companies, visit petinsurancereview.com.
- ▶ Take your pet for regular checkups. Keep him up-to-date on vaccinations and medications such as heartworm preventative and flea control. "We've had to treat dogs for heartworm—it's painful and can run upwards of \$1,000," says veterinary technician Erica Peck of Crofton, Md. "It wouldn't have been necessary if the dog had been kept on a monthly preventative, which costs very little in comparison." Buy the best food you can afford, and keep your pet fit with plenty of exercise. Keep cats indoors to prevent injury and disease.
- ▶ Don't skimp on vet care. Small problems that go untreated can spiral into larger issues that require expensive treatment. "They're our responsibility," says Gorman, who never considered cutting back on her cats' treatment after she lost her job. "There was no question that we'd take care of them just like we'd care for ourselves."

▶ **FOR MORE** money-saving pet care tips, visit humanesociety.org/petfinancialaid.

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